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“Predicates Can Be Topics”

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In her recent book, *Word Order in Ancient Greek: A Pragmatic Account of Word Order Variation in Herodotus*, Amsterdam Studies in Classical Philology 5 (Amsterdam 1995), Helma Dik uses the resources of Functional Grammar to uncover the rules for ordering words in ancient Greek. Although she restricts herself to Herodotus, her remarks have validity for later Greek as well, as David Sansone has suggested in his review of her work in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 6 (1995) 690–91.

Dik (24) proceeds on the basis of the distinction in Functional Grammar between Topic (“the information [in a clause] that serves as a point of orientation”) and Focus (“the most salient piece of new information”). In more traditional terminology, the Topic is—roughly speaking—the logical subject, the Focus the logical predicate. Her basic schema for Greek word order is:

$$P1 \quad P\emptyset \quad V \quad X$$

P1 = Topic position; P \emptyset = preverbal Focus position; V = position of the verb if neither Topic nor Focus; X = everything else (12).

One of Dik’s most convincing demonstrations appears in Chapter 7, entitled “Predicates Can Be Topics.” She begins by marshalling the Herodotean evidence to show that “Topic assignment to predicate constituents seems to be indicated especially when the predicate is a lexical repetition of the predicate in the previous clause” (207). In this case, the topicalized predicate appears in clause-initial position, in conformity with Dik’s schema: e.g. Herodotus 3. 1 πέμψας Καμβύσης ἐς Αἴγυπτον κήρυκα αἵτεε Ἀμασιν θυγατέρα, αἵτεε δὲ ἐκ βουλῆς ἀνδρὸς Αἰγυπτίου (210).

Classicists who know Coptic will hardly be surprised to read that predicates can be Topics. Shackled by a rigid word order, Coptic developed a particularly elegant way of topicalizing predicates: In order to shift the Focus from the verb, the verb itself is nominalized by being put into a so-called Second Tense. E.g. αἰῶμοος (Perfect I) ἡηαγ “he sat there” → ηἡαἰῶμοος (Perfect II) ἡηαγ “that he sat is there” = “it is there that he sat.”

Hans Jakob Polotsky, who discovered the function of the Coptic Second Tenses, describes one of their characteristic environments in his *Grundlagen des koptischen Satzbaus* I, American Studies in Papyrology 27 (Decatur, GA 1987) 134:

... dasselbe Verbum [erscheint] in zwei aufeinanderfolgenden Sätzen ... , das erste Mal in einem Ersten Tempus, das den Verbalvorgang um seiner selbst willen als Kern der Satzaussage mitteilt, und das zweite Mal in einem Zweiten Tempus, worin der Verbalvorgang als geschehen vorausgesetzt und nur wiederaufgenommen wird, um einem neuen Prädikat [i.e. Focus] als Subjekt [i.e. Topic] zu dienen.

Polotsky's description harmonizes with what Dik noted, and John 21. 1, which he cites, displays word order comparable to that in Herodotus: μετὰ ταῦτα ἐφάνερώσεν ἑαυτὸν πάλιν ὁ Ἰησοῦς τοῖς μαθηταῖς ἐπὶ τῆς θαλάσσης τῆς Τιβεριάδος· ἐφάνερώσεν δὲ οὕτως (ⲙⲙⲙⲥⲁ ⲙⲁⲓ ⲟⲩ ⲁ ⲓⲥ ⲟⲩⲟⲩⲛⲁ [Perfect I] ⲉⲛⲉϣⲙⲁⲑⲏⲧⲏⲥ ⲓⲛⲓ ⲑⲁⲗⲁⲥⲥⲁ ⲛⲧⲓⲃⲉⲣⲓⲁⲥ· ⲛⲧⲁϣⲟⲩⲟⲩⲛⲁ [Perfect II] ⲁⲉ ⲛⲧⲉⲓⲛⲉ: "... and it was in this way that he revealed himself").

In Coptic, the position of the verb is fixed. Had he written ⲁϣⲟⲩⲟⲩⲛⲁ (Perfect I) ⲁⲉ ⲛⲧⲉⲓⲛⲉ ("and he revealed himself in this way"), the translator would have taken the verb as Focus. By putting it in the Second Tense, ⲛⲧⲁϣⲟⲩⲟⲩⲛⲁ, he captured the nuance achieved in Greek by placing ἐφάνερώσεν in clause-initial position; in other words, he interpreted it as Topic.¹

The Coptic therefore confirms the correctness of Dik's analysis, and it also gives support for the conclusion of her chapter, viz. that a topicalized predicate can begin a clause even when it is not a lexical reiteration of the predicate in a preceding clause (235). Here too Coptic avails itself of the Second Tense, as the following examples show:

Matthew 13. 24 ὁμοίωθῃ ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν ἀνθρώπῳ σπείραντι καλὸν σπέρμα ἐν τῷ ἀγρῷ αὐτοῦ (ⲉⲥⲧⲏⲧⲱⲩⲓ [Present II] ⲛⲉⲓ ⲧⲏⲙⲧⲉⲣⲟ ⲛⲙⲙⲏⲉ ⲉⲁϣⲟ ⲛⲟϥⲃⲣⲟⲥ ⲉⲛⲁⲛⲟϥⲁ ⲓⲣⲁⲓ ⲓⲛ ⲧⲉϣⲟⲩⲱⲉ: "It is to a man who has sown a good seed in his field that the kingdom of the heavens is similar")

Psalms 77. 2 = Matthew 13. 35 ἀνοίξω ἐν παραβολαῖς τὸ στόμα μου (ⲁⲛⲟⲩⲱⲩⲱⲩⲓ [Future II] ⲛⲣⲱⲓ ⲓⲉⲛ ⲓⲁⲛⲡⲁⲣⲃⲟⲗⲏ [Bohairic], ⲁⲛⲟⲩⲱⲩⲱⲩⲓ [id.] ⲉⲗⲱⲓ ⲓⲛ ⲓⲁⲛⲡⲁⲣⲃⲟⲗⲏ [Fayumic]: "It is in parables that I shall open my mouth")

¹ Cf. also the following passages for a similar use of the Second Tense: Luke 17. 20; Romans 6. 10; 2 Corinthians 11. 17; Galatians 2. 1–2.

Clement 12. 2 ἤκασιν κατασκοπεῦσαι τὴν χώραν αὐτῶν (ἡλγεῖ [Perfect II] ἀπογῶτ τυχωρα [Achmimic]: “It was to examine his [*sic*] land that they came”)

The first example, like that quoted above and those mentioned in note 1, is in Sahidic, the others—taken from Polotsky’s *Études de syntaxe copte* (Cairo 1944) 42 and 45—are in other dialects, and I include them in order to show the pan-Coptic nature of the phenomenon.

In the past, close comparison of Greek and Coptic was of great help in elucidating the latter’s structure; such a comparison was, for example, the starting point for Polotsky when he sought to unravel the mysteries of the Second Tenses.² The evidence presented in this article suggests that it is now time to turn the tables and to exploit Coptic in order to deepen our understanding of Greek.³

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² Polotsky, *Études* (cited above) 24.

³ For further demonstration of the utility of Coptic in the study of Greek, see my “Coptico-Graeca: The Sahidic Version of St Athanasius’ *Vita Antonii*,” *GRBS* 12 (1971) 59–64 and “Chariton and Coptic,” *ICS* 10 (1985) 135–37 (with 303).